English Baccalaureate and Broadening the Curriculum Debate on 14 September 2017

Summary

On 14 September 2017, the House of Lords is due to debate a motion, moved by Baroness Stedman-Scott (Conservative), that "this House takes note of the impact of the English Baccalaureate on the take-up of creative and technical subjects, and the case for broadening the curriculum to create a coherent and unified 14 to 19 phase".

This short briefing provides information on the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) and recent reforms to technical education. It also provides a summary of the statistics on the take-up of different subjects by pupils. A selection of key documents is identified at the end of the briefing.
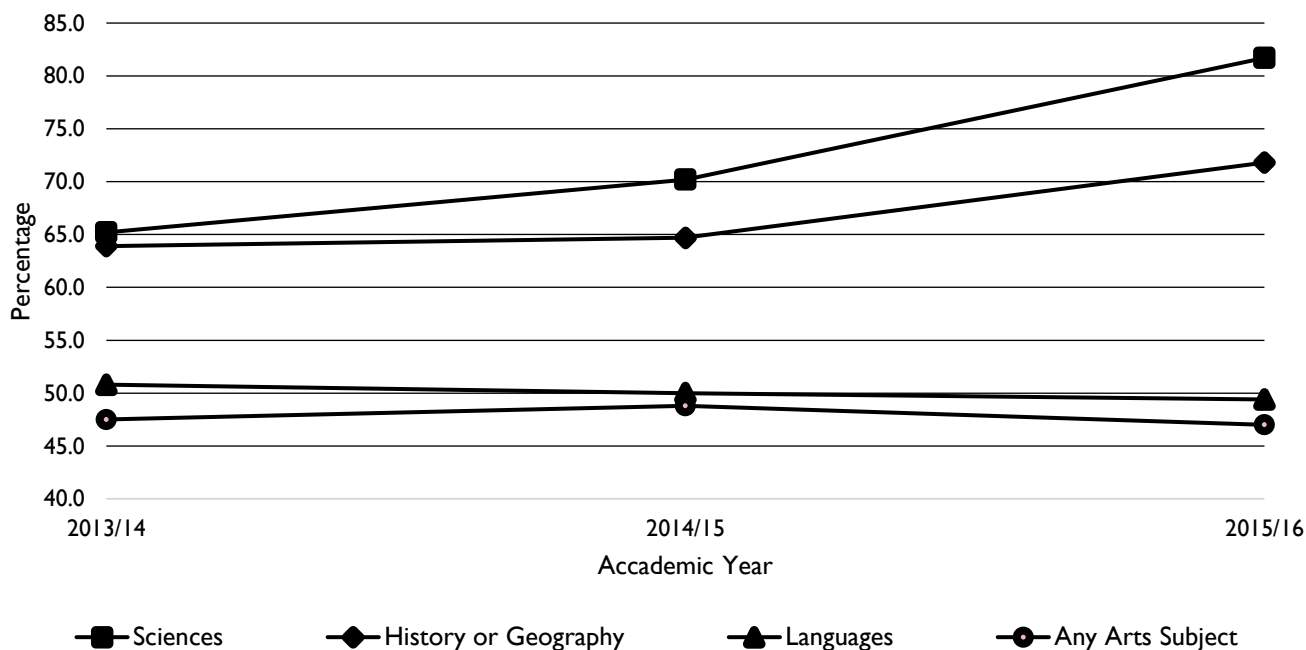
English Baccalaureate

The EBacc is a measure of the performance of pupils at Key Stage 4 (GCSE level). To achieve the EBacc, pupils must gain a C grade or above in the following five subjects: English; mathematics; either history or geography; the sciences; and a language.[1] The Government has argued that the EBacc constitutes the core subjects of a rounded education, and that studying these subjects at GCSE, and then A-level, widens the opportunities for pupils trying to enter university.[2]

While take-up of the EBacc combination of subjects has increased gradually since its introduction, the EBacc is still entered by only a minority of pupils.[3] In 2016, 36.8 percent of pupils in all schools did so.[4] The equivalent figure for pupils in state-funded schools was 39.7 percent. In the same year, 23.1 percent of pupils in all schools achieved the EBacc, compared to 22.9 percent the previous year.[5]

Impact of the English Baccalaureate on GCSE Subject Groups

The proportion of pupils taking individual EBacc subjects has for, the most part, increased over recent years. Between the 2013/14 and 2015/16 academic years, there has been an increase in the proportion of students at the end of Key Stage 4 taking sciences and either history or geography.[6] However, over the same period there has been a slight decrease in the number of pupils taking a language, from 50.8 percent in 2013/14 to 49.4 percent in 2015/16. During that same period there has also been a slight decrease in the number of students taking an arts subject, which are not part of the EBacc.

Chart 1: Proportion of Pupils at the End of Key Stage 4 Entering into Different Subject Groups

(Source: Department for Education, *Revised GCSE and Equivalent Results in England*, 19 January 2017, 'Table 1c: Entry to Specific Subject Groups')

Proposal to Increase the Take-up of the English Baccalaureate

In June 2015, the Government, then led by David Cameron, announced that it would be compulsory for children starting year 7 in September 2015 to enter EBacc subjects when they took their GCSEs in 2020. In November 2015, the Government consulted on proposals to increase the take-up of the EBacc in English state schools to 90 percent.[7] Following this consultation, the Government stated that, in order to achieve this target by 2025, it would set an earlier target: that 75 percent of year 10 pupils would start to study the EBacc combination of GCSE subjects by September 2022.[8]

Criticism of the English Baccalaureate

The selection of the subjects which make up the EBacc, and specifically the exclusion of arts subjects, has been criticised by some educational organisations. The campaign group, Bacc For the Future, has argued that the EBacc is having a detrimental effect on the take-up of arts subjects in schools.[9] The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA), has argued, that while there is a consensus that studying English, maths and science at GCSE is important, the Government had not provided a rationale for the inclusion of languages, and the choice of either history or geography. The RSA has criticised the EBacc for being too restrictive and argued that it interfered with the ability of students to choose their own subjects at GCSE in consultation with parents and their teachers.[10]

Technical Education

A majority of students after GCSE level take A-levels rather than an equivalent level 3 technical qualification. Of the 440,455 level 3 qualification students in 2016, 323,273 were studying for A-levels. 194,643 students were taking applied general or tech level qualifications.[11]

Since 2015, the Government has introduced a number of reforms intended to increase the quality of post-16 technical education and to attract more would-be students. The *Post-16 Skills Plan*, published in July 2016, proposed the creation of two equivalent post-16 educational paths: a technical option and an academic option.[12] This included the creation of 15 consolidated routes through technical education into employment. In addition, the Technical and Further Education Act 2017 expanded the role of the Institute for Apprenticeships to increase its oversight of college-based technical education as well as apprenticeships.[13] The Government has stated in its green paper on the UK's industrial strategy that it intends for its new system of technical education to benefit half of young people who do not go to university, and improve the skills base of the UK workforce.[14]

Technical Baccalaureate

In addition to the EBacc, there also exists a Technical Baccalaureate, which can be taken after GCSE. This performance measure was introduced by the Coalition Government in 2014.[15] 16–19 year old students achieve the Technical Baccalaureate based on their performance in: a tech-level qualification; an A-level equivalent maths qualification; and an extended project qualification intended to test the students' skills in writing, communication, research, self-discipline and self-motivation.[16]

Key Documents

- House of Commons Library, *English Baccalaureate*, 4 September 2017
- House of Commons Library, *Technical Education Reforms*, 21 June 2017
- House of Commons, 'Written Statement: School Curriculum', 19 July 2017, HCWS73
- Debate on 'Education: English Baccalaureate', HL *Hansard*, 4 February 2016, cols GC54–71
- Oral Question on 'Education: English Baccalaureate', HL *Hansard*, 3 July 2017, cols 665–7

Further Information

- Department for Education, *Revised GCSE and Equivalent Results in England: 2015 to 2016*, 19 January 2017
- Department for Education, *Revised A level and Other 16–18 Results in England, 2015/2016*, 19 January 2017
- House of Commons Library, *The School Curriculum in England*, 12 June 2017
- House of Commons Library, *GCSE, AS and A Level Reform (England)*, 31 March 2017
- House of Commons Library, *Engineering Skills and Design and Technology Education*, 11 March 2016
- House of Lords Library, *The Case for Arts Education in Schools*, 20 November 2014
- Department for Education, *The Technical Baccalaureate Performance Table Measure*, October 2014
- HM Government, *Building our Industrial Strategy*, January 2017
- Bacc For the Future, '8.4% Decline in Uptake of Creative Artistic and Technical Subjects at GCSE', 24 August 2017

[1] Department for Education, 'English Baccalaureate (EBacc)', 12 February 2016.

[2] House of Commons, 'Written Statement: School Curriculum', 19 July 2017, HCWS73.

[3] Department for Education, *Revised GCSE and Equivalent Results in England, 2015 to 2016*, 19 January 2017, p 9.

[4] ibid.

[5] ibid.

[6] ibid, 'Table 1c: Entry to Specific Subject Groups'.

[7] Department for Education, 'Implementing the English Baccalaureate', 19 July 2017.

[8] Department for Education, *Implementing the English Baccalaureate: Government Consultation Response*, July 2017, p 5.

[9] Bacc For the Future, '8.4% Decline in Uptake of Creative Artistic and Technical Subjects at GCSE', 24 August 2017.

[10] Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, 'EBacc Consultation Response', RSA Blog, 28 January 2016.

[11] Department for Education, *Revised A level and Other 16–18 Results in England, 2015/2016*, 19 January 2017, p 7.

[12] Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and Department for Education, *Post-16 Skills Plan*, July 2016. Further information is provided in: House of Commons Library, *Technical Education Reforms*, 21 June 2017.

[13] Explanatory Notes to the Technical and Further Education Act 2017, p 4.

[14] HM Government, *Building our Industrial Strategy*, January 2017, pp 37–49.

[15] Department for Education, *The Technical Baccalaureate Performance Table Measure*, October 2014.

[16] ibid, pp 5–6.